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FM AMEMBASSY BRATISLAVA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2334
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRATISLAVA 000089

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/CE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [LO](#)

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER LAJCAK STRESSES IMPORTANCE OF
BILATERAL TIES

REF: BRATISLAVA 76

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Eddins, for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary: In their initial meeting, Foreign Minister Miro Lajcak and Charge discussed a wide range of issues including bilateral relations, the global financial crisis, Afghanistan, Western Balkans (already reported reftel) and Ukraine. Lajcak opened the meeting by affirming that Slovakia views the U.S. as its key strategic ally and, through NATO, a guarantor of Slovak security. The Slovak Government would like to deepen the bilateral relationship and views the change in U.S. Administrations as an opening for more intensive dialogue. Lajcak also emphasized the MFA's new mandate to promote Slovak exports and encourage investment. End Summary.

12. (C) FM Lajcak told Charge February 11 that he had discussed U.S.-Slovak relations with Prime Minister Fico and that the Prime Minister had expressed his view that the new U.S. Administration could open the door to more "sincere" and intensive bilateral ties. Lajcak reaffirmed his own positive experiences working with the U.S. in the Balkans (reftel). According to Lajcak, Fico personally expressed interest in a visit to the U.S. at some point in the future.

13. (C) Lajcak confirmed that Slovakia's foreign policy priorities remain the same -- with NATO and EU commitments taking precedence -- but noted that the current economic crisis had reordered them somewhat. Thus, Lajcak said he wants to demonstrate to the PM that the MFA can play a meaningful role in mitigating the effects of the crisis. To that end, the MFA will promote Slovak exports, maintain close communication with foreign investors, and use EU membership to present and defend Slovakia's national interests. Charge offered to have Embassy staff consult with MFA officials about how the State Department, the Department of Commerce, and other agencies divide responsibilities for economic/commercial issues at overseas missions, given that the Slovaks have had some difficulties organizing a foreign commercial service of their own.

14. (C) Regarding Afghanistan, Lajcak stressed that Slovakia's commitment would be sustained and hopefully increased -- particularly in the realm of development assistance and reconstruction aid -- despite budgetary pressures. He was pleased that Slovakia was increasing its troop strength in Afghanistan. Charge encouraged continued increases, as well as a decision by the Slovak government to give its troops a more robust mandate.

15. (C) In response to Charge's question about relations with Ukraine in the wake of the January gas crisis, Lajcak downplayed previous comments by other GOS officials assessing

blame on Kyiv. He likened the episode to last year's events in Georgia in the sense that Russia "was well prepared and Ukraine handled the situation badly." Despite his initial reluctance to apportion blame, Lajcak recounted how helpful and open the Russians had been toward Slovak suggestions for resolving the crisis, in contrast to the Ukrainians, whose lack of responsiveness had greatly angered PM Fico. Nevertheless, Lajcak assured us that Slovakia would continue to support Ukraine's Euro-atlantic integration and stated his intent to visit Kyiv in the near term.

¶6. (C) Charge commented on evolving U.S. and European energy policy, noting that he expected it to be more intimately linked to climate change concerns than in the past. He stressed our desire to work closely with the EU and other partners to address both energy security questions and environmental challenges. Lajcak agreed that the one (and probably the only) beneficial outcome of the crisis was a heightened awareness throughout Europe of the need for a more coherent EU energy policy and greater energy diversity. This, Lajcak asserted, was one of Slovakia's top three priorities.

¶7. (C) At the close of the meeting, Charge highlighted our growing concerns about corruption and the investment climate in Slovakia, noting that the Embassy is supporting a variety of good governance and transparency programs being carried out by NGOs such as Transparency International. Thus, Charge added, Lajcak might see the U.S. Embassy's name in the press in connection with our counter-corruption efforts. Lajcak agreed that efforts to fight corruption were very important, but urged that the Embassy bring any specific concerns about

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incidences of governmental corruption first to him, as such matters often become fodder for internal political fights.

¶8. (C) Comment: As reported reftel, Lajcak is interested in meeting the Secretary at the earliest opportunity and we strongly endorse such a meeting. We are much less enthusiastic about the prospect of any sort of Fico visit to the U.S., and we will do nothing to encourage the Slovaks in that direction -- although their Embassy in Washington may well pursue it. On the question of Slovak-Ukraine relations, in a subsequent conversation with A/DCM, Stefan Rozkopal (please protect), Director of the MFA's Russia/CIS office, suggested that Slovakia's policy toward Ukraine had in fact shifted more substantially (and negatively) than Lajcak implied. We will follow up with Rozkopal when he returns from leave next week. For the time being, we will also take Lajcak at his word on his professed willingness to address the corruption/good governance agenda with us. In a February 18 telephone conversation regarding CODEL Cardin, Charge noted our desire to include corruption in the discussion and Lajcak readily agreed, although his subsequent comments to Senator Cardin on the subject were largely comprised of platitudes (septel). End Comment.

EDDINS